DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 590 EF 006 017

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TITLE Aesthetic Codes in Early Childhood Classrooms: What Art Educators Can Learn from Reggio Emilia.
PUB DATE 2001-10-00
NOTE 11p.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.designshare.com/Research/TarrAesthetic_Codes UL1.htm.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; Comparative Analysis; Foreign Countries; *Preschool Education; Public Schools; *Student School Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Canada; Italy (Reggio Emilia); *Social Construction; United States

ABSTRACT

This article compares the messages contained in the physical environments of early childhood classrooms in Reggio Emilia, Italy, with typical early childhood settings in Canada and the United States. The article examines the classroom's "aesthetic code"; i.e., the social construction created, consciously or unconsciously, by the classroom's environment and its impact on student feelings and social perception. The author discusses how these "codes" reflect each culture's image of the child, cultural values in general, and broad educational goals. Concluding comments explore the implications that these classroom codes have for art educators. (Contains 13 references.) (GR)

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Photo right: Diana School, looking into a courtyard from the piazza

"The visitor to any institution for young children tends to size up the messages that the space gives about the quality of care and about the educational choices that form the basis of the program."

Lella Gandini, the North American liaison for the Reggio Emilia preprimary schools

Aesthetic Codes in Early Childhood Classrooms:

What Art Educators Can Learn from Reggio Emilia

By Patricia Tarr

In this article I will compare the messages contained in the physical environments of early childhood classrooms in Reggio Emilia, Italy with typical early childhood settings in Canada and the United States from the perspective of the "aesthetic codes" (Rosario & Collazo, 1981) embodied in these spaces. I will discuss how these codes reflect each culture's image of the child, cultural values and broad educational goals. I will conclude with the implications these codes have for art educators. For clarity, I will focus on the North American kindergarten which is specifically for 5-year-olds in the year prior to entry into first grade. Many aspects of this discussion also apply to preschool classes for 3- and 4-year-olds. While I will focus my description on kindergartens in the North American context, classes for 5-year-olds in the Italian context are an integrated part of their preprimary schools which serve children from ages 3 to 6 years. (The Municipality of Reggio Emilia also funds infant-toddler centers for children under 3 years of age which operate under the same educational philosophy.)

The term "aesthetic codes" comes from Rosario and Collazo (1981) who looked at the kind of children's artwork valued by teachers in two preschool classrooms. Rosario and Collazo drew on Pierre Bourdieu's work on the sociology of perception in which Bourdieu described aesthetic perception as a social construction which is learned consciously or unconsciously (Rosario & Collazo, p. 74). My purpose is to explore how these aesthetic qualities, or codes, operate within these early childhood classrooms and what these codes might be teaching children both formally and informally. In the context of this paper, aesthetic will refer to both the visual qualities of objects and the environment and to those experiences which permit deep feeling (Flannery, 1977). Flannery describes coming into aesthetic behavior:

> As one allows one's attention to focus intensely upon the multi-faceted, multi-layered presence of feeling- visual feeling, tactile feeling, olfactory feeling, kinesthetic feeling, gustatory feeling, and emotional feeling - one comes into aesthetic consciousness and into aesthetic behavior. (p. 19)

I would also like to extend Efland's (1988) notion of "school art," art which only exists in schools (p. 518) and is "an institutional art style in its own right" (p. 519) to include the classroom environment as also an institutional style in its own right. I will argue that while all classrooms may

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have their own "school art style," North American early childhood classrooms are more distinct aesthetically from other social contexts than are classrooms in Reggio Emilia.

North American Early Childhood Classrooms

I will begin with examining the classroom environment of a typical North American kindergarten. Of necessity, the descriptions will be generalized and do not reflect all classrooms. In both Canadian and U.S. programs there is a strong value for preparing children for future life in schools. For example, in Alberta, the Kindergarten Program Statement (Alberta Education, 1995) specifically states that kindergarten is to prepare children for grade 1 as well as for the future. This strong relationship to first grade, reinforced by the kindergarten's location within the elementary school, plays a strong determining factor in the aesthetic codes that operate within the classroom.

Diana School, atelier

As we enter the school there is traditionally a corridor for human traffic to move through and into self-contained classrooms as quickly and quietly as possible. The classroom space is a discrete entity which is subdivided into "centers" including art, writing, sand/water, reading, math, manipulatives, blocks, science, and a domestic/house or dramatic play area. There is also a meeting area. The room may appear crowded with the amount of furniture and shelves in the space. Consider what is allowed into this space. On the walls are commercially made (along with some teacher-created) charts or posters. Adjacent to the calendar, or included as part of it, is a weather chart. Along the top of the chalkboards, or just underneath, are strips depicting the alphabet and numbers to10. Charts identifying colors and shapes are posted on available bulletin board spaces. There may be seasonally related posters, or pictures of community helpers (doctor, firefighter, police officer, letter carrier), or information posters on dinosaurs, parts of the body or animals, depending on the current theme of study. The bulletin boards will be backed with colored papers and surrounded by a scalloped decorative boarder. Each bulletin board may be decorated in a different color of paper with a different scalloped boarder. For example, in one small classroom I visited recently there were seven different boarders around six boards each backed in one of

three different colors. There may be mobiles or things hung from the ceiling. The overall impression is often of a visual bombardment of images. There is a particular "aesthetic" to this room. Just from the images on the walls we know at once we are in a kindergarten (or primary grade) classroom. This look, like the string paintings or string prints typical of school art (Efland, 1988), exists only in schools.

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Contributing to this unique aesthetic are the stereotypical symbols and visual qualities of the items in the room. The commercial posters and materials usually include simplified, black outlined figures reminiscent of coloring books. They are colored in bright, flat, even colors and usually have a stylized "cartoon-like" appearance. An alternate style is a slick, simplified "modernist" art style. The seasonal materials bear a "greeting card" aesthetic reminiscent of decorations purchased at the local mall or products created from popular crafts kits such as those featuring bunnies and teddy bears. When children's work is displayed on the walls, it is often placed against colored paper, surrounded by decorated borders, and hung at skewed and irregular angles. It may even be cut into shapes by the teacher to create a theme-based display.

Diana School, central piazza

In perusing both U.S. and Canadian educational catalogues, one is struck by the profusion of color; the furniture, equipment and play materials are in the primary colors: red, yellow, blue, plus green, and sometimes orange. Pastel colors are usually reserved for infant toys, or possibly girl's toys. In these catalogues you can color-coordinate your plastic drawers for storage, furniture, and fill the shelves with a wide assortment of toys, all in bright colors. These catalogues seem to be driven to saturate the environment with primary colors, seemingly based on an assumption that children prefer bright colors and the desire for children to learn the names of the primary colors.

> The flatly colored, outlined stereotyped images of the posters and bulletin board boarders talk down to children and assume that they are not capable of responding to the rich, diverse images and artifacts, including images from popular media culture, which the world's cultures have created.

Classrooms are often crowded with centers and materials yet the overall aesthetic of individual items is one of simplification in form and uniformity of style and color. Teachers can even purchase clothing and jewelry decorated with these images of apples, school buses, the alphabet, ghosts or jack-o-lanterns and Santa Clauses to match their classrooms. The flatly colored, outlined stereotyped images of the posters and bulletin board boarders talk down to children and assume that they are not capable of responding to the rich, diverse images and artifacts, including images from popular media culture, which the world's cultures have created. Even objects found at home-- vases of flowers, comfortable furniture, real dishes and tools, collections of natural materials or treasured objects-- are not typically considered essential items in an early childhood classroom. When nature is allowed into the classroom, again it is often decontextualized in the form of planting a seed in a paper cup, or caring for a class hamster. In a visual and operational sense each institution is a separate entity in relationship to the other: home is home; school is school, relatively impermeable to the outside world.

Diana School, classroom

The image of the child is one who must be protected from the outside world in order to learn. The child is seen as an object to be filled with information distilled and dispensed in regulated doses beginning with simple concepts leading to more abstract concepts. However, Egan (1988) argues that even very young children are concerned with the abstract themes of good/bad, beautiful/ugly, power/control, love and hate-- all those issues surrounding what it means to be human, are typically excluded from early childhood. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) state,

> He or she is not an innocent, apart from the world, to be sheltered in some nostalgic representation of the past reproduced by adults. Rather the young child is in the world as it is today, embodies the world, is acted upon by the world -but also acts on it and makes meaning from it. (pp. 50-51).

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The Pre-primary Schools of Reggio Emilia

In contrast, the educators in the preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia are very concerned about what their school environments teach children, often referring to the environment as the "third educator" in conjunction with the two classroom teachers (Gandini, 1998, p. 177). The environment reflects the schools' grounding in John Dewey's educational philosophy and Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory (Malaguzzi, 1998). It embodies Reggio educators' belief that children are resourceful, curious, competent, imaginative, and have a desire to interact with and communicate with others (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 114). They believe that children can best create meaning and make sense of their world through living in complex, rich environments which support "complex, varied, sustained, and changing relationships between people, the world of experience, ideas and the many ways of expressing ideas" (Cadwell, p. 93) rather than from simplified lessons or learning environments. They also believe that children have a right to environments which support the development of their many languages (Reggio Children, 1996).

Arcobaleno Infant-Toddler Center, dining room

A detailed and well-illustrated discussion of the importance of the environment in the preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia can be found in *Children, Spaces, Relations: Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children* (Ceppi & Zini, 1998). This book describes the depth to which the environment supports the educational and cultural values of the school and the community. It demonstrates the belief that children have a right to be educated in thoughtfully designed spaces. Children in the Reggio schools are learning to value their rich visual heritage and to become perceptually aware through the support of the environment designed for multi-sensory learning. As Louise Cadwell, who has adapted the Reggio approach to the College

School in St. Louis, Missouri, learned from her work with Reggio educators, "no space is marginal, no corner is unimportant and each space needs to be alive and open to change" (Cadwell, 1997, p. 93).

Ceppi and Zini (1998) use the term osmosis to describe the relationship of a school to the world outside. "A school should not be a sort of counter-world, but the essence and distillation of the society. Contemporary reality can and should permeate the school, filtered by a cultural project of interpretation that serves a membrane and interface" (p. 14). In discussing the Reggio schools they state,

> There are many components of a city and its daily activities in the school for young children, just as the daily work in the school creates a microcosm of society. So the school is not just open to the city in terms of activities and schedules, but the characteristics of the space itself (both functional and aesthetic) are as hybrid as those of the city: dense, "contaminated", simultaneous. (p.14)

There is great concern for what the environment is teaching. The design of the schools reflects the structure of the community. The schools reflect a diversity of ages and architectural styles yet each school is designed around a piazza which reflects the central piazzas of the city. These are not solely vehicles for moving through to get someplace else but serve as gathering places for children from all the classes and comfortable meeting spaces for parents and teachers. Entering the Diana School, a visitor looks down the piazza where floor to ceiling windows and plants blur the boundaries between outside and in, supporting the concepts of transparency and osmosis. Lights and shadows reflect and flicker across the floor. The piazza offers many possibilities: a store, stocked with real vegetables during my visit; the kaleidoscope large enough to hold several children; and fanciful dress-up clothes all invite investigation, lingering, conversation and collaboration.

Reggio educators include aspects of a home into the school: vases of flowers, real dishes, tablecloths, and plants. There is attention to design and placement of objects to provide a visual and meaningful context. The objects within the space are not simplified, cartoon like images that are assumed to appeal to children, but are "beautiful" objects in their own right. For example, dried flowers hang from the ceiling beams and attractive jars of beans and seeds are displayed on shelves in the dinning area of Arcobaleno Infant-Toddler Center. On the 1997 study tour to Reggio, I was struck by the beautiful wooden table with a large bowl of flowers and wooden sideboard in one of the rooms in La Villetta School. I imagined being in a fine Italian dinning room! Manufactured and natural materials available for art projects are carefully displayed in transparent containers, or objects are set on or before mirrors to provide multiple views and capture children's attention. The strong role of the arts in Italian culture is clearly evident in the place of the atelier (art studio), mini ateliers adjacent to each classroom and the role the atelierista (artist-teacher) plays in supporting children and teachers in their work.

In bringing the outside in, Reggio educators accept play and images from popular culture. Vea Vecchi, atelierista at Diana School, writes about the importance of narrative for young children,

> In this construction of virtual worlds, the characters proposed by the mass media have an important place for both the younger and the older children: Power Rangers and Sailor Moon are currently the most frequently impersonated, for which the children have precise and shared schemas concerning their roles, words and gestures. (Vecchi, 1998, p. 130)

The walls hold the history of the life within the school in the form of documentation panels of children's words and photos which synthesize past projects and chronicle current ones. Children's work and words are highly visible within the space communicating clearly to the children, their parents, and the community respect and value for children's abilities and potential, creating another form of transparency and osmosis between the school and surrounding community.

Implications for Art Educators

The preprimary schools in Reggio serve children from 3 to 6 years before they enter compulsory education. They do not operate under a mandated curriculum nor is there an emphasizes on "school readiness" which is in contrast to the more academic nature of North American kindergarten programs for 4- and 5-year-olds.

These two spaces reflect distinct cultural values for children: The typical North American classroom reflects notions of preparation for the future world of work, of an environment that isolates particular aspects of a culture, which simplifies visual forms, and protects children from the outside world. Its visual aesthetic reflects mass marketing and craft-store culture. It does not challenge children aesthetically to respond deeply to the natural world, their cultural heritage, or to their inner worlds. Art and early childhood educators can learn a great deal from Reggio educators about creating schools in which all aspects of the physical environment are carefully considered as to their educational potential without sacrificing each culture's unique values and goals.

As a professional body, art educators have a responsibility to form collaborative partnerships with early childhood educators to raise the quality of education for young children. Art education must go beyond providing art experiences that meet goals for programs involving studio, history, criticism and aesthetics and begin to consider the environments in which these activities take place. What are children learning when the goals of art education are at odds with the environment in which they learn? Art educators need to find ways to collaborate with early childhood teachers to critically examine the aesthetic codes which permeate their classrooms and then together find ways to create environments which support children's aesthetic and artistic development. Together they may examine critically the image of the child they hold and how to express this through the both the environment and the learning experiences within this environment. Together they need to explore how to incorporate aspects from the world outside school in ways that are fully integrated into the life in classrooms and not just a "lesson on ...." Art educators can assist classroom teachers with ideas and techniques for display that value and respect children's work rather than trivialize it.

Teacher educators also have a responsibility to help pre-service teachers, either general education majors in art methods courses, or art specialists, to begin to look critically at the spaces in which learning takes place to consider, "what does this environment teach?" They may also challenge pre-service teachers to seek new and collaborative roles in their future places of employment.

Reggio has shown how partnerships between artist-teachers and early childhood educators can have a powerful impact on all the learning that occurs. Art educators can be challenged to take on the role of atelierista within a school, working as partners with teachers to support children to communicate their ideas visually, help to create provocative learning experiences, and design environments that enhance children's perceptual awareness and provide places for wonder, curiosity and the expression of ideas. In a tradition where art specialists are responsible for art education and generalist teachers are responsible for the core subjects, this is a major challenge to rethink roles, responsibilities, how time is spent within the classroom and within the school, and the value of collaboration to support children's learning. However, given the vision of other possibilities from the preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia, this is a challenge worth taking.

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Acknowledgement

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Photo Captions

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